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(MAJ NICHOLLS)
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SUBJECT: Media Reaction: Koran Desecration and NewsWeek; Dhaka

Summary: The readers are mature enough to understand that the retraction of the story was not because of violent demonstrations by angry Muslim crowds in a number of countries because that could have been foreseen. It is obvious to them that tremendous pressure was brought to bear on Newsweek to plead guilty by powerful quarters. By capitulating to extraneous pressure Newsweek has seriously impaired the trust and confidence of many of its readers. Great damage has been done to the image of the magazine, not because of publishing the story about abuse of the Holy Quran but by retracting the story under duress. The paper has been exposed as being afraid of telling the truth in the face of coaxing and cajoling. Readers don't have to be told what 'anonymous source' exerted pressure. By capitulating to that 'source', Newsweek will now lack credibility in respect of many of the stories it they might publish in future. For this breach of trust with the readers the magazine can only blame itself.

Following are excerpts from the op-ed article:

Koran Desecration and Newsweek

"Newsweek's News"

Independent English language newspaper "New Age" op-ed
article by columnist Hasnat Abdul Hye comments (6/5/05):

For a newsmagazine that brings news and publishes comments on current national and international affairs it must have been a humbling experience to be in the limelight across the world. That the publicity it received after a news scoop led to violent demonstrations, bloody crackdowns by authorities and widespread condemnation of the act reported in the news scoop, could only have enhanced its embarrassment. The saving grace for Newsweek was that those who showed their indignation after the publication of the news did not kill the messenger. They targeted the American Administration as the perpetrator of the sacrilegious act. But Newsweek had to pay a price for spilling the beans because those who were exposed by the news wanted the readers of Newsweek to believe that there was no beans to spill and it was all rumor. Newsweek retracted the news and apologized to the readers and to the families of those who had died in the protest demonstrations set off by the news. This is extraordinary for a new magazine that has been savvy in handling news, particularly sensitive ones. Its selection of news, particularly news scoops, goes through a rigorous process of checks and re-checks.

Given this sensitivity of the editorial board, it is unthinkable that the news in question just slipped through the normal scrutiny of senior editors of Newsweek. The fact that the news involved Guantanamo Bay (Gitmo) detainees and the Holy Quran make it highly improbable that Newsweek's board of editors did not realize the potential of world wide repercussions among the Muslims over the news about desecration of Holy Quran in Gitmo. Like every other agency in America, Newsweek knew very well that America's credibility and honor had gone down sharply in the past two years in the Muslim world where the militants never fail to miss an opportunity to give vent to their anger against their antagonist through violent attacks. It is impossible to think that the editorial board of Newsweek did not know about the serious consequences that the publication of the news would have. But this knowledge did not deter them from revealing the truth because they thought that such revelation is in the highest tradition of media that is built on the trust of readers.

Newsweek enhanced the trust of majority of its readers by publishing the news about guards flushing down the Holy Quran in toilets in Guantanamo Bay. It was an unpleasant truth to be told by an American news magazine because it knew that its publication would bring the wrath of the Muslim world against the American administration and by extension, the American people. It took a lot of courage and moral certitude to stick to the truth.

The news scoop on the defilement of the Holy Quran was made by Michael Issikoff who had unearthed the Clinton - Lewinsky scandal and won praise for accuracy and objectivity. He is by now an old hand in dealing with anonymous and confidential sources for breaking news. So it cannot be

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suspected that he was amateurish and rash in using the confidential source before writing the story in `Newsweek's

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Periscope column about desecration of the Holy Quran by guards in Guantanamo Bay detention center(Gitmo) to humiliate and unnerve the hardcore detainees. In fact the new was already known to Defense department officials who were briefed by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) about prison personnel disrespecting or mishandling copies of the Holy Quran at Gitmo as early as 2002. According to a spokesperson of ICRC, the organization had provided several instances that it believed were credible.

The contradiction and pusillanimity in the (Newsweek's retraction) statement is mind-boggling. If the story was written `ethically' and `professionally', relying on a `historically reliable government source' and `provided to senior defense department officials who did not object to the allegations', why should Newsweek feel guilty about the publication of the story? What is the mistake involved in taking the defense official's silence for confirmation of the story? That is how stories are checked and conclusions drawn by the media. Newsweek's hand wringing and retraction of the story following the furors that erupted in the Muslim world amount to almost intellectual dishonesty. Having gone through a process of checking and getting confirmation about the news meticulously there was no scope and necessity of mea culpa.

Very few would deny that Newsweek maintained the highest standard of news gathering in this case. There was no lapse on its part in following the traditional procedures for news-gathering of this type. There is, of course, always room for improving the standard for the use of anonymous sources, as the Editor-in-Chief has mentioned in his letter. But it does not mean that he or his magazine has to disown what was done in good faith and with due diligence. For publishing a straightforward and honest news story it earned great esteem and confidence from the readers who could appreciate the risk it was taking by telling the truth. The readers are mature enough to understand that the retraction of the story was not because of the violent demonstrations by angry Muslim crowds in a number of countries because it could not be unforeseen. It is obvious to them that tremendous pressure was brought to bear on Newsweek to plead guilty by powerful quarters. By capitulating to extraneous pressure the Newsweek has seriously impaired the trust and confidence of many of its readers. Great damage has been done to the image of the magazine, not because of publishing the story about abuse of the Holy Quran but by retracting the story under duress. The paper has been exposed as being afraid of telling the truth in the face of coaxing and cajoling. The readers don't have to be told what is the `anonymous source' from where pressure was exerted. By capitulating to that `source', Newsweek will now lack credibility in respect of many of the stories it they might publish in future. For this breach of trust with the readers the magazine can only blame itself.

Chammas